

CONTRAST, CONTINUITY AND CONTRADICTION: OPENING SIGNALS IN A. B. YEHOSHUA'S "A POET'S CONTINUING SILENCE"

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ABSTRACT: Openings in fiction have received increasing attention lately from critics concerned both with narrative theory and the explication of specific texts. In his story, "A Poet's Continuing Silence," A. B. Yehoshua provides a series of opening signals that command special interest, since the text focuses directly on beginnings and attempted new beginnings in the lives of the protagonists. The various beginning strategies here highlight the psychological impasse of one character in contrast with the growth of another. These strategies also help put into relief some basic features of Yehoshua's development as a writer, and they indicate the relation of his work to trends in the recent fiction of other Israeli authors.

A. B. Yehoshua's story, "A Poet's Continuing Silence" (שתיקה הולכת ונמשכת של משורר), opens on a note of contradiction, a deliberate insistence on repetition and return that precludes a sense of real beginning:

אמש שוב איחר לשוב
(He was late again last night, . . .)¹

Dramatizing its own meaning of return through its conspicuous double appearance in this first brief phrase, the root *šub* alerts us immediately to two kinds of return in the text. In the first instance it means simply 'again' and indicates the repetitiousness of habit or routine that is to become so central a focus of this work. In the second instance, as the following pages confirm, *šub* signifies not just coming back but coming

1. "Continuing Silence" forms part of the collection *Mul hayy's'arot* (1962). Page numbers for citations in this essay refer to Barzel (1972); this first citation comes from page 105. The English translations are by Miriam Arad, in Yehoshua (1970a); here, page 9.

home. As such, it introduces a first proleptic signal of fundamental issues which confound and preoccupy the protagonists: dependence and independence, returning home and breaking away from it. Well before we know who narrates the events, to whom the narrator refers, or where and when the narrated actions and the narration itself take place, we are aware of cyclicalities and of resuming oft-repeated patterns. Indeed, not only the reiteration of *šub* creates this impression; so does the very absence of alternative exposition. Though this is the beginning of the story, there is no comment here on the origin of events recounted. The narrator does not set out by discussing the time, place and circumstances that gave rise to the actions. On the contrary, he opens by taking the reader into his confidence; it is as if he assumes a previous familiarity with the situation, allowing him simply to resume his thoughts where they last left off and to reconsider, in obsessive fashion, an all-too-recurrent dilemma.

This beginning that is not a beginning but, on many levels, a repetition and an ongoing action, prepares us for a number of central developments in the text. Critical attention has increasingly addressed itself to just this anticipatory function of fictional beginnings; beginnings have been depicted as initiatory verbal acts that do not necessarily reenact a natural order, acknowledge a temporal imperative in narrative organization, or invoke an authoritative moment of origin.² Openings nonetheless maintain a privileged status in any narrative as an element of composition. Serving primarily as a microcosm of the tensions inherent to the entire work, the opening sets the stage for the textual events that follow and harbors peculiar potential for defining the field of possibilities within which the narrator will operate. Thus, Yehoshua's deceptively simple first words may laconically report a completely ordinary action and yet contain a wealth of information about the directions the subsequent narrative will take. Most essentially they introduce the motif of return which eventually takes on many varied manifestations in the text, and which appears here as an intimation of wearily unchanging modes of behavior.

The account of an aging poet, his retarded son, and the shifting tensions of their relationship, "Continuing Silence" dwells at length on the monotony of the protagonists' barren lives. The narrator soon reveals himself

2. For example, Kermode (1967) posits that a loss of faith in the coherence of beginnings and endings signified a radical change of structure for the modern novel. Kermode's more recent work (1974) discusses the polysemantic nature of deceptive beginnings, and Said (1975) explores the topic of beginnings extensively in a philosophical and theoretical framework. Watt (1960) presents a brilliant explication of the opening paragraph in James' novel, *The Ambassadors*, and this piece remains a classic example of the possibility the study of openings holds with respect to close analysis of specific texts. Brombert (1980) provides a useful overview of critical approaches to opening signals, and his article includes excellent bibliographical information.

to be this poet who, failing to maintain his creative energies, has ceased not only to write but to desire life itself. His silence constitutes a virtual psychological paralysis, as the narrative underscores for us by playing on the two meanings of the verb *lištoq*, 'to be silent' and 'to be paralyzed':

הנה אני מוטל כמשותק, מת למחצה. (ע. 114)

(. . . I feel myself lying there as though paralyzed, half dead. p. 21)³

The son suffers a comparable disabling incapacity to function and to express himself: he cannot read or write—can barely sustain a conversation. The father's lack of productivity, which expresses itself from day to day as silence and inaction, transmits itself into the son in very concrete and exaggerated fashion as a physical malfunction. Since he embodies and materializes the old man's spiritual predicament, the son serves as the shadow of his father, paralleling his shortcomings and calling attention to them.⁴ In this way the emptiness of routine reaches disturbing dimensions in both characters and proves to be intimately linked with another, more profound kind of meaningless cyclicity: the return of the father's negative characteristics in the next generation and the confrontation with his own failures.

This is most fundamentally a dynamic and not a static phenomenon, a process and not a condition. The motif of return, implicit already in the first words of the text, involves not only a simple reflection of experience but also a displacement that evolves into a distortion. An additional sense of return implicates itself in the process as the son, in an effort to rekindle life in his father, encourages the old man to write poetry again. The son wishes to restore the father to his former vigor out of the grip of thanatic drives, (yearning for death plagues so many of Yehoshua's characters).⁵ While *šub* and *lašub* in the first sentence carry an intransitive sense, the

3. A correlation between emotional sterility and the poet's silence is made explicit in directly preceding paragraphs:

מישהו (אדם צעיר) פירסם בעיתון מעין
סיכום. הזכיר אותי כבדרך־אגב, בזלזול.
קרא לשתיקתי—עקרות. פעמים באותה
פיסקה חזר וכינה אותי עקר. (ע. 114)

Somebody (a young person) published some sort of resumé in the paper. He mentioned me, *en passant* disparagingly, calling my silence sterility. Twice in the same paragraph he called me that—sterile. p. 20.

4. The centrality of the shadow motif has been formulated succinctly and perceptively by Shaked (1970, pp. 140–41).

5. For an illuminating discussion of this aspect of Yehoshua's work and its relation to grotesque and lyrical qualities of his prose, see Shaked (1970, pp. 89–124 and 224–36).

retarded boy makes an effort to invest the notion of return with a transitive quality. The narrator explicitly acknowledges such a shift of meaning when, commenting on the situation, he uses the same root in the *hip'il* form, *lahašib*:

הנה בעקשנות דעתו החלשה ביקש להשיבני
לכתיבת שירים. (ע. 127)

(In this way, with the obstinacy of his feeble mind he tried to tempt me back to writing poems. p. 36)

The son does not succeed in his endeavor, however. He ends, rather, by taking over the role of the poet himself. While he is not properly literate, he manages ultimately to create a new poem—

מטורף, חסר-משקל, מסוכסך, שורות קטועות
ללא צורך, חזרות מתמידות ניקר משובש (ע. 139)

(crazy, without meter, twisted, lines needlessly cut off, baffling repetitions, arbitrary punctuation p. 52)—

perhaps by compiling fragments of the old man's unfinished poems. He signs his father's name to this piece and publishes it in the newspaper. The story concludes as the father discovers the poem with a shock of recognition: it is eerily both his own and not his own, a pathetic and grotesque deformation of poetry, labelled with his name as if to magnify his own inadequacies and make them visible for all to see, dramatizing the very incompleteness of his life's work. The son tries his hand at poetry as a fulfillment of the father but, ironically, the awkward, incoherent and ungainly poem, like the son himself, mirrors the old man's failures and mocks him with them. Two kinds of return converge here and undergo a peculiar reversal; return in the sense of *šub* (repetition or refrain) has perplexingly evolved into something autonomous and new, and return in the sense of *lahašib* (the boy's effort to steer the father back to a former vitality) culminates as well in a contradictory effect—unintentionally, but malignantly, the boy humiliates and exposes his father.

Consequently it is really a further implication of *lahašib* that finds its fulfillment with this denouement. Just as Yehoshua plays on the meaning of *lištoq*, so he calls on *lahašib* in certain contexts to mean 'answer' or

6. *Lahašib* signifies 'answer', e.g. page 113: . . . הוא השיב לי בשלילה. ('. . . he said no.' p. 19). *Lahašib* in the sense of more general response appears on page 118:

אם אני מבקש להשיב לו כגמולו ולשרתו
אף אני, אין הדבר עולה ביד.

When I wish to reciprocate and wait upon him in turn, nothing comes of it. p. 26

'respond' as well as 'return.'⁶ The son's inability to carry on a conversation is symptomatic of his basic failure to enter into normal social interactions. As he develops an interest in poetry, however, he begins both to question and to answer. Up to this point he has expressed himself chiefly through subservience: to his father and sisters as the family servant, to his classmates as perpetual monitor of the class and companion of the janitor, to the guests at his birthday party as shoeshine boy. Only when he learns in school that his father is a well-known poet does he begin to pay attention to class discussion, only then does the narrative record direct discourse dialogue for the boy, only then does real exchange take place between father and son.⁷ With increasingly irrepressible excitement and anxiety the boy asks his father about poetry, about a possible resumption of the discarded literary career, about how to write and spell. Concomitantly, the boy's strength and rebelliousness grow, while the father's health fails him and his alertness falters. When the old poet remarks that he can no longer write and that perhaps the son should do it instead, the boy takes the suggestion in all seriousness. His final answer to his father's obstinate refusal to live is to do it for him. Imitating the old man's work, he creates a disturbing echo of a text, but more than simply a substitution, this act is also an independent response, a disquieting one that finalizes a transition of roles and a transfer of energy from the older to the younger generation.

Along with a number of other key words that appear again and again, *sub* imposes a monotony, a repetitiousness of vocabulary onto the text and so grants the narrative a striking kind of narrowness.⁸ Consonant with the limitations of the characters, this limiting of the range of the prose serves as a direct index of the narrating figure's obsessive qualities and of the monotony in his life. At the same time, in a way that seems beyond the narrator's direct control, this apparent narrowness involves shifts of meaning that create a paradoxical resonance. Invariance here curiously engenders a wide range of possible significations. Just as multifaceted silence ironically but aptly serves as the chief vehicle of expression for the characters, so the emptiness of the protagonists' lives is a rich one, one constantly generating new manifestations. An abundance of meaning subverts the narrator's attempt to stop producing meaning, and as he rejects change, afraid both to live and to die, life still continues, ever changing ever growing; meaninglessness itself perpetually gains new dimensions of meaning.

7. The first direct discourse involving the son occurs on page 121, when the boy suddenly asks, מה אתה עושה? ('What do you do?' p. 29).

8. Some of the words that recur most frequently are *ṣatīqa*, 'or, *ṣel*, *kabar*

The dialectical tensions of repetition and progression that motivate the entire story also coexist uneasily in the formulation of the beginning as a temporal point of departure. Even as an association between continuity and constance conveys itself through *šub*, an association between continuity and motion or change conveys itself through the word '*emeš* 'last night'. This word informs us that the narration commences with a present moment and recounts an immediate past; the statement establishes that what has come before is repeated action, but also that we now stand on a threshold in time, on the brink of a tomorrow which necessarily implies new possibility. This signal of ambivalence, of a precarious and ill-defined boundary between the known and the unknown, rouses our curiosity because of its implicit incompleteness. The mention of '*emeš* leads us naturally to ask, what will happen next? Will the pattern continue or desist? Is it significant that we stand at a crossroad?

The second clause of the sentence, furthermore, leaves no doubt in the reader's mind that we are indeed concerned here with thresholds, entrances and exits:

אמש שוב איחר לשוב, וכשנכנס לא
טרח כלל להסות את בניסתו.

(He was late again last night, and when he did come in he made no effort to enter quietly.)

In tandem with the repetition of *šub*, we find here a repetition of the root *kns* in two separate forms (verbal noun and past tense, third person singular of the *nip'al*). This parallel doubling draws attention to two main aspects of the narrative: the way things have been, in the past, and the way things may be, entering into the future. Only retrospectively, of course, can we recognize that this initial moment is a moment of initiation for the son. We learn eventually that here the father can no longer keep track of his whereabouts, that he has been writing poems and found his own group of literary companions; in view of these facts the word '*iher* signals a disengagement from parental control, a rebellion against family discipline. Moreover, as the next sentences corroborate, this entrance is also an act of intrusion that inconveniences the narrating figure: באילו שנתי היא מיותרת. ('As though my own sleep did not matter.') The noise is clearly significant here, since the son does not hush his movements, even as the father flounders more and more in the quagmire of his own silence. The opening thus carefully marks the displacement of the old man by the young one.

The next paragraphs tell us that this exchange of strength is not yet complete. The father has been planning an extended vacation, but he resists making a definitive departure.

מחר או מחרתיים שוב מפליגה אניה,
וקרוב לוודאי שסוף־סוף אעלה עליה. (ע. 105)

(Another boat sails tomorrow or the day after and I expect I shall board it at last. p. 10)

The additional appearance of the word *šub* reinforces the equivocal pulls of repetition and sequence that govern the opening section as a whole. The father's search for new horizons, new beginnings, is itself a habit, a desire frequently not acted upon. The expression of doubt (*qarob l'avaday*) and the hesitation about when the voyage will actually take place (*mahar 'o mohoratayim*) encapsulate the central tension here between the possibility of progression and an inertia that prevents it.

As readers, our own entrance into the discourse is also marked by ambivalence. A sense of inevitability and self-evidence asserts itself in the first sentence through the emphatic use of *šub* and through the short, simple, declarative format of the statement, but this very self-evidence makes contrary claims on our attention. Since this opening includes no direct reference to human agents—neither names, pronouns, nor deictics that would anchor this event in a particular time and place—the sentence appears self-explanatory. But since the reader does not yet in fact possess any knowledge of the background taken here for granted, the statement seems enigmatic. The obvious and the mysterious converge in this manner, and the implied narrator asks us both to accept the narrating figure's perspective and to maintain our own. We know and we do not know at one and the same time, and the result is irony. We neither enter into the picture in total sympathy with the narrator, nor are we distanced from him, and our equivocal position leaves us free to appreciate the pull of both the old and the new, the father's lethargy and the son's energy. While we do experience the events through the narrator's personal vision, we preserve enough distance to disagree with him and our partial intimacy even permits us to feel a special repulsion for him, since it affords us simultaneously a privileged knowledge of his foibles and a critical remove from them.

At this point perhaps it is wise to pause and ask if we have read too much into a very few words. Several striking features of Yehoshua's writing respond to this question and justify the thorough explication of this particular opening.

First of all, the abstract quality of the prose and the sparsity of particularizing detail here suggest that these words have special symbolic import;

that is, they must carry more value than simply the literal information they denote. This opening does not evoke a recognizable setting nor invoke a familiar social world as an external frame of reference, hence we are not concerned here specifically with the characters and events as personalities or phenomena in themselves. The narrative manipulates our ignorance of the characters' identities in such a manner as to suggest that tensions between repetition and progression are of a primary importance that overrides the individuality of the protagonists. The anonymity of the figures indeed persists throughout the text, and, caricatures to a certain extent, the father and son resemble more a configuration of psychic forces than plausible individuals in their own right.⁹ This characterization, which reveals Yehoshua's affinities and debt to Kafka and Agnon, lends the text some of its nonnaturalistic quality and demands a suprapersonal or meta-psychological reading of the protagonists' lives. Unlike the earlier stories of *Mot hazzagen* (*Death of the Old Man*), "Continuing Silence" in its polyvalence resists allegorical interpretation. Consequently, the opening does not suggest a one-to-one correspondence between textual elements and elements of a systematic, external framework of ideas. Instead, it encourages close scrutiny of a network of relations internal to the work itself; preparing us to identify some of those basic problematics, the first sentence tells us a good deal about the relationship of the narrator to a second character, to his own narration, to his reader and to the author of the text.

Secondly, we should consider the opening strategy with special care—if not through foresight, then hindsight—for this story turns out to focus on starting and starting over. The fact that Yehoshua's first line concentrates on repetition creates a notable discrepancy between *récit* (the narrative itself) and the *discours* (the events recounted).¹⁰ Though *récit* never totally corresponds to *discours* in fiction, and though openings are most often not in fact consonant with genuine moments of origin in the fictional world, nonetheless there is a notably pointed disjunction here between the narrative time (which is sequential, i.e. a starting point) and the narrated time (which is cyclical or reiterative). The incongruity directs our attention forcefully to the denial of chronology, the rejection of temporal flow, which

9. Sokel (1959) discusses expressionist characterization in depth. See especially pages 37–38.

10. These are Genette's terms (1972). *Récit* and *discours* are largely an elaboration of the concepts *fabula* and *sjuzet* developed by the Russian Formalists. Genette's terms are preferred here, since, unlike *sjuzet*, *discours* suggests not only temporal rearrangement but also variation in point of view, digression and analogies. Rimmon (1976) schematizes in a very concise and comprehensible way how Structuralism has drawn on these ideas and she is especially helpful in clarifying the confusing nomenclature applied by various critics to essentially identical phenomena.

characterizes the father and which becomes a key to any understanding of the text. By the same token, this sequential narrative time *is* congruent with the function of the opening as a point of departure; that is, the textual beginning corresponds to the son's moment of debut in the *discours*. The ambivalent relationship of *récit* to *discours* here reinforces the central tensions articulated in the initial words through *šub* and *kns*.

The dialectic of repetition and progression further structures the overall organization of the *récit* and so, while confirming our analysis of the opening signals, justifies granting them seminal importance in the story. The presentation of events strengthens our observations of the tensions that generate the *discours*, for the division of "Continuing Silence" into four separate sections highlights an emphasis on regularity of action vs. disruption of pattern, repetition and return vs. entrance and departure.

The first section is very brief, as is the last one, and the two in the middle are of considerably greater length (see Appendices A and B). The initial and concluding sections focus on the present, when the father has retired, sold his house and placed his son, now a young man, with a foster family. The intervening sections recount the past: Part II concerns the period of the son's life up until the time he discovers poetry; Part III concentrates particularly on episodes related to his burgeoning passion for writing. Presented as a moment of reflection within the flux of time, the beginning and ending sections represent an escape from the course of history. An atemporal moment which affords the father a chance to reconsider his relationship to his son, this frame encloses the action in the middle, and consequently we identify the father primarily as a passive observer and the son as the principal agent of the action. In opposition to one's ebbing vitality we sense the emergence of energy in the other.

A whole series of parallels between the first and last sections reinforce this impression of a static frame and a dynamic story, and they contribute to the contrast between father and son. Comparable descriptions of the environment, for example, forge links between these sections. In both segments, images of intemperate weather convey a sense of entrapment and underscore the father's plight, mired as he is in inaction and indecision:

תל אביב של עונת-הגשמים, ללא ניקוז,
ללא מוצא, אגמים פורחים בה. (ע. 105)

שמים קרים ללא תקווה. דליפת גשם חרישי
ואור ראשון. (ע. 140)
(Emphasis added)

(Tel Aviv in winter—town without drainage, no outlets, spawning lakes. p. 9)

(A cold, hopeless sky. A silent drizzle and first light. p. 51)

In addition, there is parallel mention of the expected journey, parallel hesitation accompanying the father's desire to break away, parallel and pointed contrast of the son's restlessness with the old man's need for sleep.¹¹

Despite the opposition of father to son, though, neither of these figures presents a clear-cut case. Qualities of each overrun the account of the other, each is a study in contradiction, and the organization of the narrative incorporates ambivalences that reflect this fact. The father, living in a paradoxical state of death in life, recollects the past and so stands both within the course of the narrated events and outside it. This means that while pointing in opposite directions to the son's initiation and the father's inertia, the beginning of the *récit* actually coincides with the end of the *discours*. The two temporal orientations cancel one another out, for they join at an especially acute moment of impasse that invalidates the concept of progression itself. Even so, as a result of the narrating figure's simultaneous distance and involvement, this moment of complete non-movement allows unique potential for change. As Bergson pointed out, private time is closely allied to questions of free will and determinism; here is the father's opportunity to break the pattern of his thoughts, precisely because he stands outside of them, suspended on a nebulous limit between past and future.

The active story in the middle sections presents complementary contradictions, since this dynamic narrative essentially recounts a standstill, the misfortunes of a character who cannot grow. For this reason the son, too, appears as an embodiment of incongruities. The imagery that pervades the story portrays the boy as something neither entirely present nor absent, disturbingly heavy and vacant at the same time, undeniably there—im-

11. Consider, for example, the following parallel remarks from the opening and closing section. (Much of the parallelism is lost in English translation).

שעה ערובה הידהרו צעדיו בדירה הריקה . . .
היכן הוא מסתובב בלילות? (ע. 105)

הרי הנער אינו פוסק מהסתובב בלילות.
אמש המתנתי לו עד אחר חצות ועדיין לא בא.
רק בתחילת אשמורת שלישית שב. צעדיו
היעירו אותי. (ע. 139)

His steps echoed through the empty apartment for a long time. p. 9.
Where does he go at night? p. 9.

For the boy is forever roaming about these nights. p. 51.
Yesterday I waited up for him till after midnight and still he had not come. He
returned but shortly before the break of dawn. His steps woke me. p. 51.

possible to evade—and yet elusive.¹² The text specifically informs us that this is the son of the poet's old age, the product of an ambivalent moment at the boundary between youth and age. As such he is emblematic simultaneously of vitality and of weakness, characterized most aptly through oxymoron:

בן זקונים הוא לי. נולד שלא במתכוון במין
 נס ארור, שכן כבר היינו שנינו, אמו ואני,
 דורכים על סף הזיקנה. (ע. 106)
 (Emphasis added)

(He was born late in my life. Born accidentally, by mistake, by some *accursed miracle*, for we were both, his mother and I, on the threshold of old age by then. p. 11)

In the father's and son's shared incongruities we recognize once again that one is the continuation of the other. The story is about neither one figure nor the other but about both, about a reversal of roles and a resemblance that undergoes a transformation. This emphasis on evolution defies the nature of limits: the falsely perpetual present to which the father clings cannot neatly demarcate the past from a future of constantly changing scope, and as the characters grow, slowly but perceptibly, the boundaries of their very identities shift. The old poet, horrified by changes, sees his son take over his strength, his interest in poetry, finally even his name. Transition here signifies transgression of borders.

The title, encapsulating the same issues, provides an additional opening signal that corroborates this reading. The fact that the title begins with the word *šatiqa* suggests that the text will focus primarily neither on the

12. The following passages illustrate a simultaneous emphasis on presence and absence, a heavy corporeality and a weakness or vacancy that, in conjunction with shadow motif, portrays the boy almost as a specter rather than a human being:

חסר-ידן, צמח כבד . . . (ע. 107)

כבד-הליכות, לא כרוך אחרי איש מאנשי הבית.
 שריו עם עצמו ואף-על-פירכן לא חולם. בשום
 פנים ואופן לא חלמני. (ע. 108)

הוא יושב בפנית החדר, צל כבד ועצוב. (ע. 122)

unprepossessing, a heavy growth. . . p. 12

Heavy, awkward, not attached to anyone in the household, withdrawn into himself but never lost in dreams—anything but a dreamy child. pp. 12–13.

He sits forlorn in a corner, a sad, somber figure. p. 30.

father nor the son, but, rather, on the quality they have in common: the silence which signifies their relation itself. Similarly, the final indefinite noun *māšorer* includes them both, since each in effect proves himself a poet. Further linking the two figures, a sense of process insinuates itself into the title through the use of two words as a progressive: *holeket vənīmšeket*. Lengthening what in English translates as a single word, "continuing," the Hebrew version draws out the expression. The language dramatizes the concept of continuation itself, much as reiteration dramatizes the meaning of *šub* in the first sentence. The use of two words, moreover, also projects a similarity onto a sequence. Recapitulating the major developments of the text, the repetition of feminine verb endings assures that, even in the title, return forms an intrinsic, inseparable aspect of progression. Finally, considered against the backdrop of the entire story, the title points as well to the ironic reversal so much a part of the characters' experience. The silence in this story continues both as itself and as its opposite, language. An incapacity for writing turns into a text here—an incomplete poem, an externalization of all the blocking the old poet has suffered—and so we encounter a paradoxical *voicing* of silence.

This information garnered from the opening signals highlights for the reader a very pervasive concern with limits. "Continuing Silence" returns again and again to two phenomena: a balancing on a limit that leads to numerous kinds of ambivalence and a growth that subsumes those ambivalent pulls as it passes through a mysterious line at which opposites converge. Like so much of Yehoshua's fiction, this work, too, explores contradictions that exist just below the surface of the characters' lives and that, as they build up in intensity, burst into external reality with insistent and uncheckable force. This, perhaps, is where the genius of the story lies, in its ability to convey with full impact an awareness of growth, of emergence that follows its own undeniable impulse. The text, as it captures the surfacing of repressed feelings, also captures a converse loss of conscious control on the protagonists' part. Developing out of the traditions of surrealism and expressionism (which first gain prominence in Israeli writing during the '60s and '70s), Yehoshua's writing sustains the interest of those earlier artistic trends in dream and the irrational. "Continuing Silence" invests this material, though, with a new dramatic dimension and, above all, a sense of movement.

To accomplish this effect, Yehoshua does not rely on standard stylistic methods of modernist tradition such as abrupt juxtaposition or the disruptions of temporal and causal narrative links typical of automatic writing. Neither does he sever denotative ties to an intelligible, external frame of reference via extravagant metaphor or a violent wrenching apart and recombining of words and phrases. The son's poem exemplifies precisely

the kind of work that results from undermining links of contiguity: fragmented, disjointed, lacking transitional elements. By contrast, the composition of the story itself is relatively simple, conforming by and large to the conventions of social realism. The narrative is coherent on the level of both individual sentences and longer segments of discourse, and, save for the frame structure, this story progresses chronologically.

This world nonetheless evolves into a disquieting kind of reality, on the very limit of the plausible. Its oddity results in part from the uncomfortable disjunction that permeates the relationship of father and son, the gap of communication between these two that prevents interaction. These figures merely mirror one another in a distorted and ironic way, and when they do exchange words the experience is painful and frustrating. Furthermore, the son's energy itself generates bizarre incongruities. The growth of a figure who has been defined as incapable of growth invests the narrative with a persistent sense of anomaly. The son's actions, well meant but misdirected, wreak havoc throughout the story; the poem is but final proof of the discrepancy between his vigor and his understanding which inevitably leads to the grotesque. In his overzealous pruning of the garden, for instance, he destroys flowers and vines as well as weeds. His eagerness to be helpful likewise makes him the laughingstock of his classmates, when he should be the guest of honor at his own birthday party. The father's dream about him in the opening segment of the story captures in concentrated fashion the frightening contradictions of his nature, gentle disposition and cruel results:

מה היה? הוא הופיע בחלומי, עמד בבירור
לפני, במדומה לא הרחק מחוף־הים, בחיקו
היו טמונים עופות כהים, והוא כבש את פרפורם.
הדהים אותי חיובו. עמד לפני, השיר אלי
מבטו וחייר קלושות. (ע. 104)

(What was it? He appeared in my dream, stood there in full view before me, not far from the seashore, I think, dark birds were in his lap, and he quelled their fluttering. His smile amazed me. He stood and faced me, looked hard at me and gave a feeble smile. pp. 9-10)

Most essentially, the son's growth is perceived as peculiarity and incongruity because it is unexpected. In literature the relationship of textual events to the possible is determined more by convention and reader expectations than by resemblance to events in the extra-literary world. Here the narrating figure prepares us to see the son as something less than human, as one who can never change, and through the impassibility of the narrator and the virtual lack of action in the text the readers, too,

come to feel that things here will not progress.¹³ Therefore we are susceptible to the same shock the father experiences as he finds himself suddenly in the grip of that which he has always neglected. In this respect, "Continuing Silence" could be compared most efficaciously to short fiction by Julio Cortázar such as "Cartas de Mamá" or "Casa tomada," stories which similarly developed out of and extended the principles of surrealism.¹⁴ In Yehoshua's text, almost imperceptible changes build up gradually till they amount to a total abdication of control on the father's part.¹⁵

This story effectively captures the growth of the irrational precisely because it is a limit genre, a text on the boundary between the realistic and the surrealistic which allows phenomena on the limits of our awareness to creep up on us. "Continuing Silence" maintains a compelling authenticity because of this ambivalence; events here cannot be lightly dismissed as a mere construct of the imagination, a purely artistic entity, for the characters are believable enough to engage our attention and our empathy. As exaggeration increases, the bizarre has already insinuated itself into the plausible as a reality in its own right, and in this way the text illustrates for us how madness encroaches on the father. The old man has frequently called his son a limit case, perhaps not entirely as feeble-minded as many people think:

13. The father remarks at the outset,

מכבר אני רואה אותו כלא־משתנה, כמי
שלא ישתנה. (ע. 106)

I have long regarded him as unchanging, as one who will never change. p. 10.

The narrator acknowledges his own limited vision of the child at times. When the son at the age of six buries photographs of his dead mother, the father notes:

בפעם הראשונה פקחנו עינים וראינו לפנינו אנוש קטן. (ע. 108)

For the first time our eyes opened and we saw before us a little human being. p. 13.

14. These stories appeared in *Bestiario* (1951) and *Las armas secretas* (1964), respectively. Arriguci (1975) provides an insightful analysis of Cortázar's postmodernist fiction in its relation to surrealism and the remarkable development of the fantastic in recent Spanish American literature.

15. The prose reinforces the feeling of gradual build-up in a number of ways: through progressives, as in the title, through the recurrence of *hitpa'el* verbs that denote process, and through verbal metaphor that endows the inanimate world with animate qualities, e.g.

תל אביב של עונת־הגשמים, ללא ניקוז,
ללא מוצא, אגמים פורחים בה. (ע. 105)
(Emphasis added)

מקרה-גבול הוא. ועל הגבול הוא נע. (ע. 106)
 עלי להחליט על גורלו. הרי הוא מתחיל
 לפרפר על הגבול. (ע. 129)

(. . . I insist he is a borderline case. He hovers on the border. p. 10)
 (I must decide his fate. He is beginning to waver on the border. p. 38)

The reader, seeing ever more parallels between the two figures, realizes that the father in converse but comparable manner also approaches the limits of rational behavior. For many years he has perched precariously on a threshold between death and life, sleep and waking, dreaming and consciousness.

"Continuing Silence" marks an additional stylistic limit in that it stands between the author's earlier, more universalistic, allegorical work and his later attention to particularizing, realistic detail. As a result, this story presents disturbingly ambivalent suggestions about the social implications of the fictional events. Not an autonomous artistic world that disavows naturalizing tendencies, nor one that restricts itself entirely to personal, introspective vision, this text nonetheless begs the question of pertinence to contemporary social concerns. Does Yehoshua address specifically Israeli issues in this fiction, or does he direct himself more generally to inner worlds, to psychological matters of more or less universal appeal? It is hard to say, for private experience here does find correlatives in the description of the external environment, but these details of the public realm function largely as a projection of the narrator's state of mind. In typically expressionist manner, the author externalizes and makes visible the innermost experiences of his protagonists, crystallizing feeling into concrete imagery. Private psychological limits, for instance, correspond to physical limits in the outside world; the young man's foster family lives in Jerusalem very close to the border (ע. 137) *בסמוך מאד לגבול*, practically in the wilderness. Tel Aviv similarly remains separated only by a thin stratum from the raw forces of nature, just as the protagonists balance on the edge between reason and unreason:

אני יודע. תשתית חול לעיר הזאת. אילמת
 ואטומה. מתחת לשכבה הדקיקה של בתים
 ומדרכות—מדבר סתום של חול. (ע. 138)

(I know. This town is built on sand, dumb and impervious. Under the flimsy layer of houses and pavement—a smothered desert of sand. p. 41)

Tel Aviv, indeed, is in danger of submitting at any moment to the primitive regressive impulse that so troubles the father. The root *sub* here again signals a resistance to progress and a desire to seek refuge in oblivion:

חורף. שפלה זאת רק נושקים אותה גשמים
 וכבר היא מבקשת לשוב ולהיות לביצה. (ע. 133)

(Winter. With the first touch of rain these lowlands strive to revert to swamp. p. 43)

Because the narration itself hovers on the border between introspective vision and external description, we are left with referential doubt, with gnawing uncertainty over whether or not individual lives here reveal social values in an identifiable context.

Nurith Geertz (1980) has observed that in the fiction of many of Yehoshua's contemporaries, similarly private or even oneiric, hallucinatory vision does in fact correspond to events in the public realm and reflect a collective world view. In much of this work a poetics of prevarication, metaphoric distortion and episodic fragmentation reveals a new and widespread fear of imminent national disaster. Geertz argues that it is always difficult to differentiate entirely between the personal and the political in this narrative, because of Israel's unique social history:

To be or not to be is not a personal dilemma, but a national one. Israeli writers treat national problems not because they have decided that the writer must be involved, but because their most fundamental existential problems are shared by all Israelis. The personal biography of an Israeli writer is also a social-historical biography. (p. 77)

Can the same be said of Yehoshua's anonymous poet and his retarded son?

To answer this question it may be profitable to look at "Continuing Silence" against the background of recent trends in Israeli literature which Robert Alter (1977) has diagnosed as a problem of horizons. Many narrative works from the '60s and '70s grapple with the constrictions and uncertainties of the Israeli political situation, the claustrophobia endemic to a state of siege, and Alter suggests that many authors retreat from the collective emphases of the previous literary generation, the *Palmaḥ* writers, in an attempt to transcend the limits of historical circumstance. Fiction writers have by and large turned to a series of individualistic styles, drawing on various modernist traditions, and many have turned as well to a cosmopolitan focus and a concern with *yārīda* that often translates itself in their fiction as a frantic shuttling between varying international scenes. (Consider, for example, Yehuda Amichai's *Lo' me'aksav, lo mikan* — *Not of this Time, Not of that Place*, Yoram Kaniuk's *Sus 'es* — *Rockinghorse*, even Yehoshua's *Hamma'aheb* — *The Lover*, with its *yored* protagonist, Gabriel.) The sense of claustrophobia that marks these works manifests itself in "Continuing Silence" as an urgent need for new directions or for a transition from old outlooks to new ones—a question, that is, less of

horizons than of emotional and generational limits. Having reached his full capacity for accomplishment within his old framework of viewing things, the father here must create a new set of goals, a new context in which to generate meaning, or yield to the next generation the right to do so.

Along these lines, Gershon Shaked (1970) has read much of Yehoshua's writing as a portrait of an Israel tired of war, eager to surrender to dissipation in sleep and death. Certainly on one level "Continuing Silence" presents an example of a weary, older generation that doubts the future and a second generation that, unable to live up to the glory of its heroic parents, seems misbegotten even in its most fervent efforts. The reading of this text as social parable, grotesque and exaggerated as it may be, is compatible with a psychological reading that likewise revolves around limits. In both the communal and the personal perspective, the grotesque derives not only from the son's limitations but from the father's inability to recognize him as an individual and adapt to the changing contours of each one's identity, expectations and needs.¹⁶

This reading, furthermore, is compatible with a metanarrative one. "Continuing Silence", after all, is a text about literature, about poetry and the failure of poetry, and tensions that clearly govern inner and outer worlds in the story both exist through and put into relief the narrative elements that constitute the text itself. It is important here that the protagonist is a poet, for this is a man whose very vocation demands that everything signify. Poetic closure supposes that all elements of a poem belong together in a meaningful and self-contained way; even disparate elements of a lyric poem, particularly as they are reinforced by symmetries of metrical pattern, rhyme and typography, may reveal links of likeness and unlikeness.¹⁷ The failure of poetry here thus means the collapse of an outlook or an inability of the imagination to impose coherence on the world. But though this man may no longer be able to fashion meaning and beauty in the world as he would like, he still has a story to tell. Things

16. Morahg (1979) traces the problematics of denied confirmation throughout Yehoshua's fiction. The matter deserves further attention, especially in terms of its relation to narrative voice and textual organization.

17. For very thoughtful remarks on the distinctive qualities of poetic discourse, see Culler (1975, pp. 161-88). Barzel (1972) has some interesting comments on the role of the narrator as poet in "Continuing Silence." He notes that this character's tendency to see things in a metaphoric way justifies patterns and symmetries in the text which might otherwise seem unacceptably contrived. The motifs of shadow and light, rain and sunshine, desert and vegetation, all involve a series of oppositions that are a function of the poet's search for meaning via an imposition of his own imagination onto the world. Nonetheless, Barzel does not answer the fundamental question, why a poet?

may not make sense, but they do continue whether it suits him or no. By the same token, in the text we witness an undermining of the lyric by narrative action, a sustained development of events that insinuates itself into an attempt at atemporal, introspective vision.

The opening signals of "Continuing Silence", which prepare the reader for simultaneous emphasis on paralysis of will and the possibility of change, arrested motion and forward development, resemble those of other Yehoshua stories. Many of the stories in the collection *Mul hayyṣ'arot* (*Facing the Forests*) begin and end with a focus on impasse or vicious circle. The title piece, for example, begins:

גם החורף האחרון בערפל אבד. כרגיל
לא עשה דבר. את הבחינות דחה, העבודות,
כמובן, לא נכתבו.

(Another winter lost in fog. As usual he did nothing, postponed examinations, left papers unwritten.)

and *Yom šarab 'arok*, *yə'ušo*, *'išto ubito* ("A Long Hot Day, His Despair, His Wife and His Daughter") begins:

עוד יום שרב, הוא מהרהר לפתע בשנתו
ולבו מתמלא יסורים.

(Another hot day, he thinks in his sleep and is suddenly filled with anguish.)

According to Geertz (1980), this kind of construction fits into a general pattern discernible in many recent Israeli stories. By contrast, Palmah generation stories frequently open with a retrogressive view that explains the origin of a current problem, and the narrative then moves forward to a suitable resolution of conflict. The underlying assumption of such fiction is that problems are inherently solveable, if only enough energy is directed at dealing with them. Rejecting this simplicity, the stories of Yehoshua and his contemporaries reflect a new national mood of doubt and irresolution. In addition, the beginning as return which generates so many developments in "Continuing Silence" reflects an obsession of the author within the corpus of his own work. In the later novella, *Bitəhillat qayış—1970* (*Early in the Summer of 1970*), there is a new selfconsciousness about this concern which expresses itself in the narrator's recurrent insistence that we return to the beginning of his tale to appreciate its poignance. In his subsequent work, *Hammə'aheb* (*The Lover*), Yehoshua presents us with a different set of variables: a new flexibility on the part of both older and younger generations, a new and complex openness to opposing points of view, a new relationship in the narrative between the symbolic and denotative reference, a new note of hope. Yehoshua seems

to have moved here beyond the dilemmas posed in "Continuing Silence" in all their rich ambivalence, and he seems to have moved as well beyond his own sense of impasse that marks much of his earlier fiction.

Appendix A: *The Opening Section*

א

אמש שוב איחר לשוב, וכשנכנס לא טרח כלל להסות את כניסתו. כאילו שנתי היא מיותרת. שעה ארוכה הידהדו צעדיו בדירה הריקה, במסדרון דלקו כל האורות, והוא פישפש בלי סוף בניירות. לבסוף נדם. אני גיששתי שוב אל עבר תרדמה זו של זיקנה, קלה, רופפת. נוסף לכך, הגשם. זה שלושה שבועות השמים נוטפים עלינו בעקשנות, מפלים של מים לוטשים את השמשות, ערדדק.

היכן הוא מסתובב בלילות? איני יכול לדעת. פעם הצלחתי לעקוב אחריו לאורך רחובות אחדים. אולם ידיד ישן, פרוואיקן עקשן, תפס אותי בקרן אחד הרחובות ואחזו מיד בכנף בגדי, ובינתים נעלם הנער. מחמת הגשמים הופכת שפלה זו ביצה של אספלט, חול ומים. תל־אביב של עונת־הגשמים, ללא ניקוז, ללא מוצא, אגמים פורחים בה. והים מרחוק, אפלולי כלשהו, מזוהם, נוהם, כאילו נסוג מן העיר הענקית והפך רקע. עדיין לא חמש וכבר מאפירים החלונות. מה היה? הוא הופיע בתלומי, עמד בבירור לפני, כמדומה לא הרחק מחוף־הים, בחיקו היו טמונים עופות כהים, והוא כבש את פרפורם. הדהים אותי חיוכו. עמד לפני, הישיר אלי מבטו, וחייך קלושות.

עתה עולה מחדרו קול רפה של נחרה. ואני יודע, להמשיך בשנתי כבר לא אוכל. מחר או מחרתים שוב מפליגה אניה, וקרוב לדאי שסוף־סוף אעלה עליה. מצוקה זו שבי סופה להיעלם. בזאת אני בטוח. רק צריך אני לשמור על כבודי עד לרגע הפרידה. אין זה אלא ענין של כמה עשרות שעות.

אף־על־פי שאיני רואה אותו עכשיו, אני בטוח: הוא שקוע בשינה, ידיו על לבו, עיניו עצומות, פיו פעור, נשימותיו ברורות.

Appendix B: The Closing Section

ד

כמה איומה עונה זו. אד וכפור מכסים לסירוגין את השמשות. חורף קשה כזה איני זוכר. יומם ולילה, ללא הפוגה, מתמשכת האפרורית, ובשעת-שחר עודה נכפלת. מי בראי? עדיין אני. אכן חרוצה בחריצים. רק העינים בולטות, בורקות בחיות מתמיהה.

עומד אני לנסוע. אניה אחת החמצתי. אניה אחרת ממתינה לי כבר. צריך רק לתחוב את שארית הדברים למזודות, לקפל את המגבות, לצרור את הכסף ולהסתלק. כבר שבעים ימים אנו חיים פה על המזרנים; ובעל הבית בא להציץ עלינו יום-יום. איש זה כבר קיפח את שארית סבלנותו. מסתובב סביבי ביאוש, מחכה להסתלקותי. אתמול אף איים במשפט. בפרוטותיו האחרונות קנה את הבית. יש לו חלומות.

ואכן, אין להשתהות עוד. צריך לשלח את הנער לירושלים, אל כורך-הספרים שמצפה לו ליד הגבול. אסור להשתהות עוד. הרי הנער אינו פוסק מהסתובב בלילות. לאחרונה הפסיק לכתוב. אמש המתנתי לו עד אחר חצות ועדיין לא בא. רק בתחילת אשמורת שלישית שב צעדיו העירו אותי.

דלת המרפסת חורקת מתחת ליד. הרצפה רטובה, זרועה שברי עלים וענפים שלאחר סער. שמים קרים ללא תקווה. דליפת גשם חרישי ואור ראשון. היקום הגדול המוכר כליכך מטפטף לפני בדומיה. רחש עלי העץ. האם לא ביקשתי לכתוב? האם לא היו לי געגועים לכתוב? אך על מה אפשר עוד לכתוב? וכי אפשר עוד לומר דבר? אני אומר לכם: הכל מירמה. הרי אפילו עץ-הצפצפה שלנו מתפורר. גזעו נושר פצלות-פצלות. צבעי הגינה דהה, האבנים מעלות איזוב. להישלח כחץ איטי אל השמים. להיות מוטל על מוך העננים. הגב כלפי האדמה, הפנים כלפי תכלת בלתי-משתנה. משורר-בדימוס שכמוני —

הגשם מתגבר. טיפות ניתזות אלי. אני נעקר, שב על עקבי. בבית דממה חיוורת ושריקה קלה של נחרה מרחפת בו. אני הולך אל קיטונו. מלבושי-הלילה נשרכים אחרי. צלי כבד על קיר צר. אף הוא ישן על מזון. נורת-הלילה שלו מוטלת על הרצפה למראשותיו. עדיין אין תוא יכול להירדם בלא נר-תמיד זה. בין חרכי התריס נחתכות בלי הרף פרסות דקות של אור ראשון.

אני מתבונן בשתיקה בנדרם המוטל לרגלי. אחר מבקש לעזוב את החדר, אלא שלפתע אני מבחין בכמה גליונות של עיתונים המתגוללים על הרצפה. ליד המזון. אימה אחזת בי. אני מתכוּפף מיד, אוסף אותם. הגליונות עדיין לחים, הדיו הסריה מכה נתיבים רפים על אצבעותי. אני פונה אל החלון, אל מעט האור הבוקע.

תוספת של אחד העיתונים הקלים, השחצנים. והתאריך — היום הזה, הפורץ אל העולם. אני מדפדף בידים מתות בעמדים. בפאתי אחר מהם אני מגלה את השיר: מטורף, חסר-משקל, מסוכסך. שורות קטועות ללא צורך, חזרות מתמיהות, ניקוד משובש.

לפתע מתעמקת הדממה. קול הנשימות גווע. הוא פוקח את עיניו, אדומות וכבדות משינה. ידו מגששת אחר משקפיו המוטלים ליד המזרן. הוא מרכיבם, מתבונן בי — העומד ליד החלון. והנה חיוך קל, מתחטא, עצוב כלשהו, מאיר את פניו.

רק עכשיו הבחנתי. שמי שלי מטיט בראש השיר, ובאותיות מתמוטטות.

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